



CAN YOUR CUBICLE BE A GREAT PLACE TO WORK?

STRESS REDUCTION TIPS FOR CUBICLE DWELLERS

One in eight Americans work in a cubicle.¹ Criticized (and satirized) for being too sterile, too small and too confining, the cubicle has also been blamed for fueling work-related stress. Some of its drawbacks may be beyond your control, such as the amount of space you have and the inability to shut out distractions by closing your office door. But you can still make your cubicle a great place to work, minimizing job-related stress along the way.

Step 1

Dress it up.

You spend up to eight hours a day in your cubicle, maybe even more. Make a point of creating a space that makes you smile.

- » Pictures from home, children's drawings and cards or small posters can brighten your surroundings. Or how about a plant or a few small toys? Having a tactile or visual stress reliever can help you relax and focus.
- » A calendar is an important business tool for almost anyone who sits at a desk. Find a calendar you love to look at. With the right calendar, just turning to the next page once a month can provide a breath of fresh air.
- » Does a project you've worked on have a related marketing brochure or postcard? If so, hang it up. Having a visual reminder of work you've done well can help you feel positive about your job *and* add a nice look to your cubicle.

Of course, you should always remember that your cubicle is not a private space. Avoid clutter and anything that's inappropriate for a public area. If you're unsure, ask your supervisor for guidelines.

Step 2

Make it work.

Making your workstation functional is critical not only to productivity but also to your wellbeing.

- » Take ergonomics seriously; repetitive stress injuries can be disabling. Fortunately, most employers understand that setting employees up properly, even if it means paying for training and specialized furniture or equipment, is preferable to dealing with the human and financial consequences of poor ergonomics. Take advantage of your company's ergonomic trainings and request proper equipment when necessary.

If you'd like to look up some current ergonomic suggestions, one good place to look for information is www.webmd.com. (Search there for "ergonomics" to find relevant articles.) You can also recommend that your employer learn more about ergonomics by visiting the website of the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety & Health Administration at www.osha.gov/sltc/ergonomics.html.

- » Organize your space. Cubicle walls are a great place to pin important timelines, project plans and phone lists. Keep frequently used files on your desk, using file dividers or paper trays to keep things organized, and use your filing cabinets for other papers. Maintaining a logical filing system will save you time and trouble when you need to find an old document in a hurry.
- » Make your own peace. One of the most common complaints of cubicle dwellers is that the surrounding noise is distracting, annoying or even infuriating, making it difficult to focus and causing stress. If this is an issue for you, talk with your supervisor about getting headphones so you can listen to calming music while you work. If you can't concentrate with music on, try earplugs or a CD of soothing sounds, like ocean waves. Just make sure the CD is not so relaxing that it puts you to sleep, or so loud that it disturbs your neighbors!

¹ Julie Schlosser, "The Great Escape," FORTUNE Magazine, March 15, 2006. URL (cited on 8/28/06): http://money.cnn.com/2006/03/09/magazines/fortune/cubicle_howitwork_fortune/index.htm?cnn=yes

- » Practice good cubicle etiquette, as common courtesy *and* to prevent unnecessary workplace tension.
 - Don't speak more loudly than you need to, and don't use speakerphone.
 - If you must have your cell phone on, set it to ring quietly or vibrate.
 - Know that strong perfume or cologne, or even strong-smelling food, can be an irritation to others.
 - Always consider the people sitting on the other side of the partition, and think about moving impromptu meetings or casual conversations to a meeting room or break room.

And remember, you don't really have any privacy in a cubicle. Always assume that anything you're saying on the phone will be overheard.

Step 3

Take a break.

Taking adequate breaks – getting your eyes off the computer screen and your backside up out of your chair – is part of any decent ergonomic plan. But the benefits to your mental wellbeing are just as important.

- » Sunshine (with proper sun protection, of course) is thought to be a mood enhancer, and a breath of fresh air can energize you, so get outside for a break if you can.
- » If you don't have time to exercise before or after work, fit twenty minutes or more of physical activity into your lunch break at least three days a week. When you are under a lot of stress at work, exercise is an excellent outlet.

This article is for informational and self-help purposes only. It should not be treated as a substitute for financial, medical, psychiatric, psychological or behavioral healthcare advice, nor as a substitute for consultation with a qualified professional.

Pulling Your Hair Out Over Workplace Stress?

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides counseling, work-life assistance, self-help tools and other resources to help you with:

- » Achieving work-life balance
- » Stress and anxiety
- » Depression
- » Marital and relationship problems
- » Child- and eldercare, financial and legal issues, and much more

Whenever you need help managing your stress, call MHN. Intake specialists are ready to assist you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and your call is confidential.

For more information, call
(866) EAP-4SOC
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